

Dawit Habtemariam's Narrative of the Sons of Africa

This was written during the months of May and June of 2015. This narrative documents facts, my personal experiences, and is meant to inform future generations of Haverfordians about the group Sons of Africa.

During my freshmen year in January 2012, I found out about Sons of Africa one night. I was sitting in my dorm room playing video games when a student knocked on my door and gave me a letter. The letter told me about what SOA is, its history, and told me to come to the Black Cultural Center on a late Sunday evening. I was interested in it because I wanted to get to know other black men on campus. At the first meeting there were about 13 men there. All of the men there were people I've seen on campus but never spoke to. The seniors and juniors told us what Sons of Africa is and what it meant to them. It was a safe place for black and latino men on Haverford's campus. It was very heartwarming and sincere and convinced me to join.

Solidarity Week was the first thing we had to do before we can join. For Solidarity Week we all had to do was wear suits all day for the school week and meet for dinner in the evening in the DC. We could not tell anyone why we were dressed up and we could not talk to anyone who was not part of SOA. On the Friday evening of that week the new members and I were inducted into SOA. Later we had a party and that was fun. The last group event we did was a Super Bowl party in the Black Cultural Center where we ate pizza and buffalo wings. Even though we had only four events throughout the year I knew most of the black men on campus and they always talked to me and said "Hi Brother Dawit."

The group had a strong positive impact on me. I felt I was part of a brotherhood. I felt like I was appreciated, for the first time in my life, for being a black man. Where I came from there were no black male role models but in this group I met a lot of black male role models. The seniors inspired and encouraged me to speak up and speak out and to not be afraid of what other people think. The group made me feel very welcomed at Haverford and more confident of who I was. I also had a lot of fun being a part of the group because we would just joke and talk about anything from race to sports to music. I felt blessed to be part of this group.

After the seniors graduated, the group Sons of Africa was inactive for a year and a half. The juniors who became seniors were expected to lead SOA but they ended up not leading it so

the group was dead. The other Sophomores and I tried to resurrect it multiple times but we were all too busy participating and leading other activities. I was very busy being Co-Head of BSL. I really missed SOA and its absence affected the freshmen and the other sophomores.

During the middle of my junior year, Marcus Levy `15, I, and Brandon Alston `14 resurrected the group as Co-Heads by hosting activities and inviting current members and men who were interested. We started with an alumni event where multiple alums who were part of SOA from previous years came to Haverford to speak about the group and give their personal stories to current and new members. The alumni event had a strong impact on recruitment. We hosted a Super Bowl Party, a Smash Brothers video game, parties, and study sessions every Wednesday. Most of them were spectacular and some were failures. At the end of the year, we had the induction ceremony and welcomed seven new members.

Being Co-Head of Sons of Africa during my junior was very much a struggle. Nobody was really involved except for the guys who were part of it during my freshmen year, Brandon Alston `14, and Ruben Monnarrez `14. Because no one but two guys from the Class of 2014 and four guys from the class of 2015 knew what SOA was we pretty much had to rebuild the group from scratch. We tried to recruit new members but we did not successfully recruit new members until after the alumni event. What kept me going was my strong desire and passion to create a black brotherhood again.

During my senior year Sons of Africa was very active. Marcus Levy `15 and I led the group to have multiple events and foster a community. We wanted SOA to be a relaxed and serious community. We held study group sessions every Wednesday. SOA helped host and developed the workshops for the CHAS Conference, participated in community service, hosted parties, dinners, workshops, and a lot more. A complete of our activities are in the 2014-2015 events sheet. Most of the events were free but for the ones that required us to pay for them we gathered funds from Students' Council and the Office of Multicultural Affairs.

One thing I tried to emphasize in the group was an awareness and rejection of patriarchal attitudes. Historically, the group has been a place where men can objectify women, make sexist comments, be homophobic, and be ignorant of gender inequality without being judged in front of women. I worked hard to make sure the group would never be a place for that behavior and that we would grow into men who fought for equality for all human beings. I organized a Womynist speaker to come to Haverford to give a public lecture and had workshop for men on how they

contribute to the feminist movement. For the CHAS conference I brought the idea of a workshop on how men can contribute to gender equality. I did not tolerate sexist comments during our meetings and made sure to remind men at the our meetings not to make comments like that. On issues of sexism, some members changed and grew and some did not.

Other things I emphasized were group leadership and going public. It was very important that we dependent on each other and supported each other. The foundation of a true brotherhood is mutual support and love. I made sure to encourage different members to come up with ideas for events and then take the lead on them. This built leadership skills in our members and made them feel more connected to the group's success. SOA was also more public this year. SOA never host events for people who are not in SOA. This was the first year SOA actually hosted events for the general student body. We wanted to educate ourselves and engage with the Haverford community. I think this made the year 2014-2015 one of SOA's most successful years in its history.

One of things SOA struggles are criticism from people who are uncomfortable with the idea of a group that excludes people based on race. Some people call us a cult or militant and think that our existence is unnecessary and only isolates and alienates black and latino men on campus..No one who understands what SOA is or the experiences of students of color would say this. I think people disliked and were uncomfortable with the fact that you can only be part of SOA if you identify as a man and are of African descent. So only black and latino men can be a part of it. I was already alienated when I came to campus and SOA is what made me feel accepted and a part of Haverford's campus. SOA is a safe place where men who understand each other can support and strengthen each other in an institution that still privileges the experiences and narratives of white people over that of colored people. As long as race and gender still affect people's Haverford experience, SOA must exist.

SOA strengthened and supported me to realize my potential. I met so many amazing and inspirational people. SOA gave me access to mentors, knowledge, and wisdom. SOA meetings uplifted me when things got tough at Haverford and kept me strong and full of life. SOA is what drove me to be active in issues of racism on campus, join college committees, join student council, and be a leader on campus. I felt loved by the group and I loved them like brothers. Some of my best friends came from SOA. After I graduated and had to say goodbye to SOA members I actually cried for the first time in 5 years... SOA helped me grow into a racially

conscious professional young man who came to understand what brotherly love meant. Even though I have graduated from Haverford College I am a Sons of Africa Brother forever...

-Dawit Habtemariam `15